

Food for Thought—The Wise Men



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I am thankful Matthew tells us about the visit of the Wise Men (his is the only gospel that does), for it is a story of wonder, and in it there is much to learn.

One of the first things that stands out in this story is that the Wise Men—probably Persian—knew that a Jewish King or Messiah would one day come and had been watching for a sign to let them know when he'd come. How on earth had they even known such a king would come, and why would they care? It is almost certainly the legacy of Daniel and his Jewish captive comrades. While Daniel's demise had been plotted and attempted (unsuccessfully) by jealous satraps, political officials, the wise men at court were probably grateful to him. When Daniel heard from God what the king's dream had been as well as its interpretation, he saved the lives of all the wise men at court (who were about to be executed for their failure to know what the king dreamed). Seeing the miraculous revelation of the dream probably made the wise men eager to listen to Daniel and learn from him.

As one king and then empire (Babylonian to Medo-Persian) was replaced by another, Daniel appears to have continued through his long life to reveal the God of Israel to other wise men at court and to have introduced them to prophetic scriptures about the coming Messiah. Some 500 years passed between Daniel's death and the birth of Christ, yet a significant amount of the knowledge Daniel shared with the wise men seems to have been retained—enough that they were expecting a great Messiah King of the Jews to one day make his appearance. This, I think, is a good reminder of how long-lasting one person's influence can be.

It is also revealing to compare the wise men from the east, the magi, with Herod's own wise men (in this case scribes and others knowledgeable regarding the scriptures). Doing so helps reveal what wisdom is. It is clearly not the same thing as knowledge. It is what we choose to do based on the knowledge we have. Based on what they knew of the coming Messiah, the magi undertook (seemingly with no hesitation) a long arduous journey that would take two to four years round trip. Even for people with wealth and influence, such a journey would be long, uncomfortable, and at least somewhat dangerous. But the wise men knew that this trip was well worth all of that. They knew what to value. They rejoiced as they approached Bethlehem. And there is no indication that they were disappointed. They didn't arrive at Mary and Joseph's dwelling and say, "What!? The Messiah is a child in this common, everyday working family?! I

can't believe we made the long trip for this!" Far from it, they gave the child their gifts and their adoration.

What about Herod's "wise men"? They knew the scripture foretold the Messiah's birthplace to be Bethlehem, only a five mile trip from Jerusalem. And the appearance of the magi and their description of having seen a sign of the Messiah's coming surely should've given these scribes an indication that the Messiah might really have come. Yet there is no indication that even one of them went to Bethlehem to seek him or check things out. Even though they were Jewish, they were not interested in even making a two hour walk for a chance to discover and encounter the Messiah. Herod's learned men had at least as much knowledge as the magi did, but they chose to do nothing with it. They may have feared to go, afraid Herod would be angered and punish them if they did. But there is no indication that even one of them tried to go secretly—following the wise men--or making their way to Bethlehem at night under cover of darkness. They had knowledge, but what they did with that knowledge showed that they were foolish, not wise. Truly wise men do did--and still do--seek Him.

The dream in which God tells the wise men not to go back to Herod must've encouraged them. It had a practical purpose, but I imagine that hearing from God at this time also cheered them, giving them confirmation that God really was in this, that they really had found the Messiah and not been mistaken or on a fool's errand.

The scripture tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The magi knew whom to value, truly believe in, and honor—the Creator, the Lord of Light and Life. Herod's learned men, contrariwise, had much knowledge but feared Herod more than God and valued their physical safety more than the hope of the Messiah. They made no effort to seek Him were thus revealed to be not wise. The magi, who were indeed wise men, responded to the amount of light God had given them and without hesitation went to seek Him.

--*Sally*